

Missiological pleas for cultural diversity: Two voices from the non-Western World¹

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Introduction

It is no breaking news any longer that Christianity's numerical centre of gravity has shifted from the North/West to the South/East.² Together with the numerical has gone another shift which is just as significant: a shift in the centre of gravity of the missional outreach of (at least) Protestant churches. In 1942 Archbishop William Temple pointed to the global spread of the Christian church as "the great new fact of our time." In the middle of the 1980-ies Professor Paul Pierson made use of the Archbishop's words by saying, "The great new fact of our time, forty years after William Temple's statement is *the rapid growth of the non-Western Christian missionary movement*."³ What has been portrayed as the modern missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries is changing from a predominantly Western monocultural endeavour into a global and multicultural one.

A striking feature in the process is the interest in mission research which is emerging in the Two-Thirds World. A good example is the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology in Ghana, established and led by Kwame Bediako. In cooperation with the University of Natal the Centre offers a Postgraduate Diploma in Theology and Mission as well as

master and doctoral programmes. In this connection it is stated that "what is needed is for scholarly reflection and interpretative depth to inform and strengthen the African Church in its task of Christian witness...."⁴ Interest in missiology, in other words, is rapidly growing in the Two-Thirds World. Over the last two-three decades Asians, Africans and Latin-Americans have both contributed substantially to this particular field of theology and underlined the need for a missional perspective in the traditional theological disciplines as well.

As much as missiology as a discipline was conceived and developed in Western academic settings, this post-colonial trend brings new challenges and concerns to the fore. First of all there may now be a need for "the western church to listen to what the third world church has to say."⁵ Not surprisingly a common denominator in non-Western missiological writings is the critique of the modern missionary movement's dependency on Western culture in general and the Enlightenment in particular. The perspective has been underlined strongly also by the late South African missiologist David J. Bosch,⁶ and Jørgen Skov Sørensen, Denmark, has recently informed Nordic missiologists on the magnitude of the challenges involved.⁷

The modest purpose of this article is simply to give an ear for a moment to an older African theologian, Kwesi A. Dickson, Ghana, and a younger Asian, Hwa Yung, Malaysia, and listen to how the two plead for liberation from "the burden of the Enlightenment" (Hwa Yung).⁸ If missiology today is not thoroughly geared to cultural diversity, the result will remain "uncompleted mission" (Dickson).⁹

The African voice: Kwesi A. Dickson

The Ghanaian Methodist Kwesi A. Dickson is a reputed theologian and church leader in Africa, mostly known for his studies in biblical/Old Testament theology. Of special interest to us is his book *Uncompleted Mission. Christianity and Exclusivism* from 1991/2000. Let me briefly highlight three of Dickson's concerns.

Firstly, he takes pains already in his introduction not to be misunderstood in his use of the term exclusivism. He makes a significant distinction between *exclusiveness* and *exclusivism*. "Christi-

anity does lay claim," he says, "to a message which has to do with the unrepeatable act of God coming in God's Son Jesus Christ who, on the cross, took on the sins of men and women of every age and place, and triumphed. In the sense of being unrepeatable, it is an *exclusive* message [...] The issue is how the implications of this *exclusiveness* are to be understood."¹⁰

The implications should not be understood the way it has been done as the church moved from continent to continent. The attitude has all the way been dominated by "*exclusivist* thinking," i.e. a way of thinking which "starts from the basis of one's own perspective – and ends there."¹¹ Consequently "the exclusiveness of the gospel message comes to be defined not so much by the fact of God in Christ reaching towards humanity as by the presenter's apprehension of that fact." That to Dickson is *exclusivism*, and it has manifested itself in many ways. The consequence - what Africa is concerned - is that "there has been no real engagement between Christianity and African life and thought."¹²

Dickson ends his introductory terminological clarification by the following observation: "[...] the essential characteristic of this *exclusiveness* is, paradoxically, that God seeks community with [...] all peoples. *Exclusivism* misses something of this paradox."¹³

Secondly, Dickson elaborates on the influence of exclusivism on the church in Africa through Western missions and missionaries and their attitude to local culture and traditions. His preoccupation is not so much with the political expansionism of the West as with the cultural.

A consequence of the Reformation's insistence on *Sola Scriptura* and justification by faith, according to Dickson, was that Reformation theology had "the potential for encouraging the formulation of the kind of mission policy which would view other peoples' religious traditions as unimportant, if not dangerous."¹⁴ This obviously turned out to be the case in otherwise quite different representatives of Western theology. Karl Barth "echoed [...] an unbridgeable gap between Christianity and other systems of life and thought."¹⁵ Ernst Troeltsch on the other hand – even though he understood that Luther's emphasis on faith "involved cutting off religion from culture" – identified Christianity with Western culture and "maintained that non-Western inquirers

would have to leave their cultures behind in order to appreciate the Christian faith."¹⁶

Considering that Dickson is first of all a biblical scholar, his comments on Schleiermacher's and Harnack's depreciation of the Old Testament is interesting. Regarding it as "being equatable with heathenism" Schleiermacher recommended that it "could be printed in the Bible, but after the New Testament as an appendix," Harnack recommended that it "should be deposed from canonical rank and placed at the head of the Apocrypha."¹⁷ This attitude among European theologians had its effect on the view of African culture and traditions: "African life and thought, having as little value as the Old Testament, cannot have a place in the establishment of the church in the mission field, for they would blind the converts to what was truly Christian."¹⁸

Christian exclusivism in the African context, in other words, has its underpinnings in some of the celebrated names in European theological scholarship.

Thirdly, what Dickson says thus far is neither new nor surprising. The most interesting part of his book is the way he attempts to trace the roots of Christian exclusivism in the Bible itself.

His presentation of the tension between "the two attitudes – the exclusivist and the open" in the Old Testament is quite conventional.¹⁹ Far more original and controversial are his perspectives on the New Testament and – especially – on Paul. Already the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) set "a dangerous precedent" in so far as it revealed "the unresolved doubts [...] regarding the acceptability of the non-Jews *as they were culturally*."²⁰

Even Paul himself, in spite of his insistence that the Gentiles were free from the Law, shared in this doubt – and he never resolved it. Dickson deals with texts both from Acts and the Pauline letters to establish the conclusion that Paul all the way maintained that the converts had to adopt "the piety that was part of his Jewish background." There is no indication that his mission to the Gentiles saw any "need to respect their cultural authenticity."²¹ His attitude to the converts' cultural particularity, therefore, was "basically unsatisfactory."²² Indications show that "Paul was not in a position to draw the full implications of the gospel of freedom."²³

Summing up, not only is the unavoidable *exclusiveness* of the gospel rooted in the Bible, the harmful *exclusivism* of Christianity through history is rooted there as well. The task for today is to "draw the *full* implications of the gospel of freedom" and open up in a new way for cultural diversity. Dickson's own contribution to that task is a challenging and meaningful reflection on the hermeneutical circle between the text of the Bible and the local, African cultural context.²⁴

The Asian voice: Hwa Yung

The Chinese-Malay Hwa Yung is a younger representative of Asian theology who has made himself heard on the international scene over the last few years. From heading Malaysia Theological Seminary he is presently serving at Trinity Theological Seminary, Singapore, as leader of its Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia. His field is systematic theology with an emphasis on theology of mission. Hwa Yung is of interest in our context because of his plea for cultural diversity as the church goes about its mission today on a global level. Let me also with respect to Hwa Yung focus on three concerns of his as they come through in his book *Mangoes or Bananas?* from 1997.²⁵

Firstly, the very first page of the book starts by introducing "reasons for dissatisfaction with Western theology" from a Two-Thirds World perspective.²⁶ Not only is it generally and quite naturally geared to the Western context, but much of it has been "controlled by Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism, which together have combined to produce a climate of scepticism that hampers the genuine expression of biblical faith."²⁷ This has led to the not surprising perception, Hwa Yung argues, that Western theology "often fails to be pastorally and missiologically relevant."²⁸

This, to Hwa Yung, is a critique that disqualifies much of Western theology from being meaningful in Asian socio-political and cultural contexts. One of the basic criteria for an adequate theology is, namely, that it must "empower the church in the evangelizing and pastoral task of calling men and women to repentance and faith in Christ."²⁹

Theology however has certainly not been lacking in pastoral and missiological relevance all through its history. The New Tes-

tament is "a record of theology in mission" where the interrelationship between the two is so strong that mission may be said to be "the mother of theology".³⁰ With the early church the situation was somewhat similar. Theology was shaped primarily by pastoral and missiological concerns. "All theology was understood as practical as opposed to merely 'speculative theology'."³¹

The shift in all this started in the medieval period. "As the social location of the theology switched from the church to the newly emerging 'universities', theology increasingly became separated from its pastoral and missiological roots." The influence of the Enlightenment in its turn led to "a programmatic separation between theory and practice."³²

Secondly, it is of importance to Hwa Yung to point out why the Enlightenment had such detrimental influence on Western theology and its pastoral and missiological relevance. At this point his thinking goes along with David J. Bosch's presentation in *Transforming Mission*.³³ Of the reasons observed I mention four:

- The supremacy of reason leading on to "a radical anthropocentrism, which increasingly had no room for God." It produced scepticism instead.
- The cause-effect mode of thinking which eventually implied a "mechanistic view of a closed and deterministic universe." As a consequence the idea of purpose disappeared, and so did "the miraculous and supernatural, which simply cannot happen in a closed mechanistic universe."
- The scientific advances and the discovery of what to the Europeans was "the New World" which eventually brought confidence and optimism and "the sense of superiority felt by Western civilization over others." For Christians "increasingly, the Kingdom of God became identified with Western culture and civilization." All this "gave rise to the sense of both religious and cultural superiority felt by missionaries in the modern period."
- The idea of the emancipated and autonomous individual led to "a rampant individualism" which "accentuated the tendency, already present in Western Christianity, towards the individualization of salvation."³⁴

Hwa Yung then underlines the missiological consequences of Enlightenment thought particularly in two areas. Firstly, in what today is often referred to as "signs and wonders." When "the possibility of divine intervention in the world" is neglected in the tradition of Western theology and mission, he argues, it has to do with a worldview inherited from the Enlightenment, but shared neither by the Bible nor by the Two-Thirds World.³⁵ Secondly, in the field of theology of religions. "Despite claims to the contrary," he says, "Asian cultures and religions are not necessarily theologically more inclusive than Western Christianity."³⁶ The roots of the pluralists' approach really belong to "the burden of the Enlightenment," although "its proponents have also drawn on inclusive elements in Asian thought in order to universalize its appeal."³⁷

Thirdly, in his plea for missiological relevancy in Asian cultural settings Hwa Yung first of all points to the need for theology to address the sociopolitical situation in which the church finds herself on the continent. Latin American liberation theology has at this point revealed a far more sensitive approach than traditional Western missiology, and "Asian Christians have in recent years also begun seriously to do the same."³⁸ At the same time he underlines that theological talk of liberation must not be confined to sociopolitical perspectives, but include freedom "from sin which is the root problem."³⁹ That, he says, "raises the all important question whether it is possible to bring about genuine liberation without direct evangelism."⁴⁰

Together with the need to be sociopolitically sensitive goes the need for serious attention be given to "inculturation." Interestingly in our context we see in Hwa Yung a presentation of Paul and the Apostolic period that differs markedly from Dickson's:

[...] the Gentile breakthrough in Christian mission in the Apostolic period was made possible only because Paul and others fought for the translation of the gospel into the Hellenistic culture on the basis of the universality of the gospel. This meant that the church at its very beginnings was committed to cultural pluralism as a fundamental missionary paradigm.⁴¹

He joins Dickson, however, when he goes on immediately to

state: "Unfortunately, in subsequent centuries the church often lost sight of this ideal."

Translating the gospel relevantly into Asian cultural settings, then, will necessarily need to take into account issues like the following:

- Worldview. By and large Asian cultures operate with no strong dualism between spiritual and physical, but tend to integrate the two in a "holistic" way.⁴²
- Ways of thinking. While the West emphasizes rational thinking in the attainment of reliable knowledge, the emphasis in Asian cultures is more on inter-human relationships and personal experience. Consequently different emphases may "end up shaping the predominant theological [...] approaches taken from within each culture differently."⁴³
- Family and group solidarity. This basic trait of all Asian cultures has clear implications for "how evangelism and church planting is done," how "moral thinking" is developed and formulated, and for the concerns and ways of "pastoral practice."⁴⁴
- Guilt and shame. Even though the two may be present in all cultures, the emphasis on shame is predominant in Asian contexts. To lead people from "shame cultures to come to a clear understanding of sin in the Christian sense" is a task that requires profound and updated cultural understanding and approach.⁴⁵

Summing up, through serious grappling with Asian sociopolitical situations and basic cultural concerns the church may prove itself today to be "committed to cultural pluralism as a fundamental missionary paradigm" as it was "at its very beginnings."

Concluding remarks

Let me end by way of three brief concluding remarks.

- The two voices – Kwesi A. Dickson, Ghana, and Hwa Yung, Malaysia/Singapore – seem to be in basic agreement that there is what the former calls an "exclusiveness of the gospel."⁴⁶ This exclusiveness, however, does not in any way demand a sort of uniform cultural exclusivism. To the contrary, corresponding to

various cultural contexts it must find its expression in cultural diversity. They further agree that Western ethnocentrism has been severely impeding proliferation of such a diversity.

- The two disagree, however, as they account for the origin of Christian cultural exclusivism. Dickson finds its roots in the Bible itself, not least in Paul's inability to draw the full consequences of the "gospel of freedom." Hwa Yung sees "the burden of the Enlightenment," rooted in pre-Christian Greek philosophers, to be the real problem and the reason why the church in the West has not been following up on what Paul started.
- What these African and Asian voices present ties up with deep concerns in Western theology/missiology today and opens up for significant and fruitful dialogue.

On the one hand Western missiologists have for some time been preoccupied both with the problematic effects of the Enlightenment paradigm and with the question whether the relationship between this paradigm and Western theology and mission(s) is, after all, as simple as it is often portrayed.¹⁷

On the other hand Hwa Yung's critique of the Enlightenment and much of the subsequent Western theology goes together with a clear warning against the danger of overreaction. Overreaction may simply entail a "consequent loss of Christian identity."¹⁸ He has no sympathy for "a distorted iconoclasm of everything Western."¹⁹ Even the Enlightenment paradigm with its emphasis on reason and rationality has positive aspects which the church cannot afford to neglect:

[...] the very fact that Asians approach truth more via relationship and experience, and westerners more via their rational faculties, is enough to demonstrate to us our need for each other to help us to come to a greater and more wholesome perception of the wonder and majesty of God. This and much more remind us that it is much more fruitful for East and West to learn from one another. [...] how else can we finally bring into the 'Holy City' the fullness of 'the glory and honor of the nations' (Rev 21:26)?²⁰

Notes

- ¹ The article was originally presented as a workshop paper at the symposium "Theology meets multireligiosity," the University of Aarhus, May 2002.
- ² For a recent interesting and challenging presentation of the (possible) ramifications of this shift see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford 2002.
- ³ Paul Pierson, "Non-Western Missions: The Great New Fact of Our Time," in Patrick Sookhdeo (ed.), *New Frontiers in Mission*, Exeter/Grand Rapids 1987, p.9. (Italics Pierson's.)
- ⁴ The statement is found in the Centre's brochures for its various programmes as they were introduced in the fall 2000.
- ⁵ G. H. Muzorewa, *An African Theology of Mission*, Lewiston, N.Y. 1991, p. XIII.
- ⁶ Cf. his *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1991/1992, pp.262-362.
- ⁷ Cf. his article "The End of Modern Mission? A Plea for a Vulnerable Missiology," in *Swedish Missiological Themes* Vol 88, No 4 2000, pp.611-626.
- ⁸ Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, Oxford 1997/2000, p.118.
- ⁹ Cf. the title of Dickson's book, *Uncompleted Mission. Christianity and Exclusivism*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1991/Nairobi 2000.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4. (Italics added.)
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.3. (Italics added.)
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.4.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p.6. (Italics added.)
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.82.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.83. To say that Barth is echoing an unbridgeable gap between Christianity and other systems is somewhat misleading. Barth's "unbridgeable gap" is between God and human, between God's revelation in Christ and religion.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.83.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.84.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.84. This whole sentence is given in italics by Dickson, indicating the significance he attributes to the issue.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.24.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.47. (Italics Dickson's.)
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p.48. An example of Dickson's exegesis: When Paul starts his speech at Areopagos (Acts 17) by referring to his listeners as *desidaimonesteros* - most often translated 'religious,' Dickson adopts a second possible meaning of the term: "a bad one which would characterize the people of Athens as superstitious." *Ibid.*, p.43.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p.57.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p.59. (Italics Dickson's.) Whereas some commentators on the church in Africa have underlined the need for an African "Paul," Dickson's point is the opposite: the task of the church today is to complete what Paul did not accomplish.

- ²⁴ Cf. his chapter 5: "Exclusivism and the Church Today," and chapter 6: "Conclusion," pp.124-162.
- ²⁵ Hwa Yung expressed some of the same views in the article "Critical issues facing theological education in Asia," in *Transformation* Vol 12, No 4 1995, pp.1-6, and in the paper "Some Issues in a Systematic Theology That Takes Seriously the Demonic," delivered at a consultation under the theme "Deliver us from evil" convened in Nairobi by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in August 2000 (www.gospelcom.net/lcwe/dufe/Papers/HYung.htm, visited 20 April 2002).
- ²⁶ Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?...*, p.1.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.9 where reference is made to this perception of European theology among Korean *minjung* theologians: "The Korean *minjung* theologian, Ahn Byung-mu, makes this point emphatically in his criticism of European theology."
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.57. An interesting illustration of Hwa Yung's concern that this be not only a criterion of a specific "theology of mission" but of Christian theology in general, is the fact that his book, originally a dissertation submitted under the title *Theology of Mission in the Asian Church*, was eventually published as *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*. Cf. *ibid.*, p.IX.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.20. Interestingly Hwa Yung is quoting Western theologians like George Peters and Martin Kähler for these expressions.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p.21.
- ³² *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.
- ³³ Cf. above note 6.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.44-49. In his presentation of Enlightenment thought Hwa Yung draws on the Chinese scholar Carver T. Yu, *Being and Relation. A Theological Critique of Western Dualism and Individualism*, Edinburgh 1987, and emphasizes that the roots of this way of thinking in the West goes back all the way to the pre-Socratic Greeks, *ibid.*, p.49 ff.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.71-72.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.120.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 118,120. The last quotation appears in italics in the book. - Hwa Yung is keen to point out that the influence of Enlightenment thought is not confined to Western theologians only. After analyzing representatives of Asian post-World War Two theologies he concludes that "nearly all [...] in different ways and to different extent [...] are still being held captive to Western dualistic thinking and the Enlightenment paradigm," *ibid.*, p.222.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.67, where reference is given e.g. to Kim Yong Bock and Aloysius Pieris.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.68, with reference to Gustavo Gutierrez.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.68. He continues, "At least one observer, the late Bishop Stephen Neill, argues that that is something which as yet needs to be proven."
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.76. For his approach at this point Hwa Yung refers to Lamin Sanneh's study *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1989.

- ⁴² Ibid., p.78.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p.80. "[...] the Western mind focuses on critical conceptual and analytical issues like, 'How can miracles be possible in a scientific age?' The Chinese mind is likely to ask, 'Can I trust the person who [...] told me of the miracle?' [...] The Indian mind is likely to say, 'I will accept its truthfulness if I can experience it for myself.'"
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p.83.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p.85.
- ⁴⁶ Even though Hwa Yung does not use the same terminology he expresses himself along the same lines in what he says about "faithfulness to the Christian tradition" (ibid., pp.102ff.) and about the "essence of the Christian faith or the gospel" as it is expressed in "the ancient ecumenical consensus of Christianity's first millennium" (ibid., p.100).
- ⁴⁷ The issue has been dealt with recently in the North Atlantic Missiology Project. Cf. Brian Stanley (ed.), *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment*, Grand Rapids, Mich. 2001. According to Chad Mullet Bauman's review of the book "Brian Stanley argues that missionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stand in a more complicated relationship to the Enlightenment than is often alleged. If the modern missionary movement was a child of the Enlightenment, it was sometimes a rebellious one [...]."
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., p.62. Again it is interesting to see how he depends – both in terminology and thinking – on Western theologians, in this turn especially on Andrew Walls.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p.239.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p.240.

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